

March 4, 2015

Becoming a U.S. citizen has benefits

Q: *I've been a green card holder for the past several years and I think I now have the option to become a U.S. citizen. What are the differences? Should I stay in my status as a permanent resident, or should I become a citizen?*

A: We're glad to hear that you are considering U.S. citizenship. The United States has a long history of welcoming immigrants from all parts of the world. America values the contributions of immigrants who continue to enrich our country and preserve its legacy as a land of freedom and opportunity.

There is no requirement that a green card holder, or Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR), naturalize – it is possible to remain indefinitely in the U.S. as an LPR, and U.S. law does not require an individual to choose one nationality or another. Deciding to become a U.S. citizen is one of the most important decisions in an individual's life. If you decide to apply to become a U.S. citizen, you will be showing your commitment to the United States and your loyalty to its Constitution. In return, you are rewarded with all the rights and privileges that are part of U.S. citizenship.

Some of these rights and privileges include:

- Right to vote: Green card holders cannot vote in federal or state elections.
- Residency requirements: If you are a U.S. citizen you are not subject to a residency requirement. LPRs are required to maintain a permanent residence in the United States and must not be outside of the United States for more than 365 days. Failure to abide by this will result in abandonment of status and entrance back into the U.S. may be denied.
- Legal protection: An LPR who commits a crime, depending on the severity, could lose status and be subject to deportation or denied entry. U.S. citizens do not face this risk unless they obtained citizenship through fraud.
- Job opportunities: There are many jobs in the United States that require U.S. citizenship, both in the public and private sectors.
- Military service: LPRs may enlist in the U.S. military, but citizenship is required for officers.
- Immigration benefits: U.S. citizens can sponsor family members that green card holders cannot. A citizen can file for fiancés, parents, siblings, and married children over 21 years of age, and generally with a shorter waiting time.
- Public Assistance: Green card holders have restricted access to public funds and must wait five years before they can receive entitlement benefits or public assistance.
- Travel: U.S. citizens can travel to 172 countries without needing a visa. LPRs travel on the passport of their nationality and are subject to the visa requirements of that nationality.
- Running for office: Many elected positions require U.S. citizenship.

- Taxes: Both green card holders and U.S. citizens are required to file federal income taxes.
- Finally, being an American, like being a Jamaican, is just awesome.

While lawful permanent residency and naturalization both offer advantages, there are differences between the two. Naturalization may hold more privileges and protections than holding a green card. However, choosing to naturalize comes with added responsibilities and it is a personal choice that should not be taken lightly. We wish you well with your decision.

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